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AUTHOR Madey, Doren L.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the major findings and recommendations of the final evaluation of the State Dissemination Grants Program (SDGP), a major initiative within the mission of the National Institute of Education to assist state educational agencies (SEAs) in implementing, strengthening, and institutionalizing dissemination services that improve educational practice and equity. After brief descriptions of SEA dissemination systems, the SDGP, and the evaluation study, a summary of findings notes that dissemination capacity was being built. Factors affecting the building of capacity are then delineated as state factors, program design and management factors, and other structural factors, and four major recommendations are stated. Addenda include a description of data sources and collection methods, and a map showing states that received grants through the program. (NRP)

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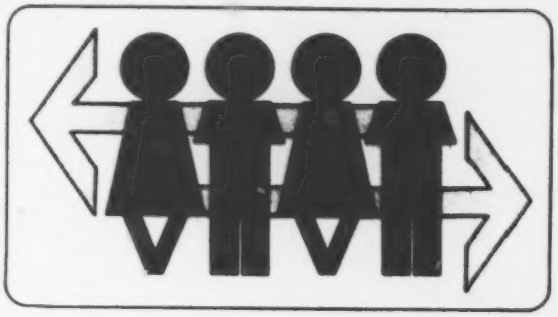
# Volume V
# Executive Summary of the Final Report

an evaluation of NIE's State Dissemination Grants Program



# THE STATE DISSEMINATION GRANTS PROGRAM

Building Capacity for Improvement of Educational Practice

Prepared for:

Research and Educational Practice Program
Dissemination and Improvement of Practice
National Institute of Education
Washington, D.C. 20208

Prepared by:
**NTS RESEARCH CORPORATION**
2634 Chapel Hill Blvd.
Durham, N.C. 27707

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OF

THE FINAL REPORT

# BUILDING CAPACITY FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE: AN EVALUATION OF NIE'S STATE DISSEMINATION GRANTS PROGRAM

Prepared for: Research and Educational Practice Program
Dissemination and Improvement of Practice
National Institute of Education
Washington, D.C. 20208

Prepared by: NTS Research Corporation
2634 Chapel Hill Boulevard
Durham, North Carolina 27707

April, 1981

## STAFFING

Project staff responsible for the five volumes which represent the final report for this study are:

Doren L. Madey
Project Director

Eugene C. Royster
Principal Investigator

Robert L. Baker
Senior Analyst

Jolinda K. Decad
Senior Analyst

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This volume, Executive Summary of the Final Report, summarizes the major findings and recommendations of the evaluation of the State Capacity Building Program conducted by NTS Research Corporation for the National Institute of Education.

In previous volumes we acknowledged those who contributed to our general efforts over the past four years. Their contributions to the conceptualization, data collection, analysis and production of the evaluation study were invaluable.

We would like to thank the State Capacity Building project directors and all the state personnel who participated in the study, for without their assistance this study could not have been conducted.

We would also like to thank John Egermeier, Project Officer, of NIE's Research and Educational Practice Program for his valuable suggestions and critiques. A. Jackson Stenner of NTS offered valuable insights in our efforts to conduct the study.

Other NTS staff also contributed to this report. Norm Frieberg assisted with the computer analyses and Dick Merritt maintained the data base. Our project secretary, Celeste Burnett together with Barbara Priboth, Lynn Elliott, Sarah Bonner and Joyce Lindsay, with dedication and perserverance, typed and produced the five volumes which constitute this report, remaining patient throughout numerous revisions.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1975, the National Institute of Education (NIE) established a program which provides grants to SEAs to help them design, implement, and institutionalize SEA dissemination systems. That program is the State Dissemination Grants Program (SDGP). This report is from a study of the first four years of that program -- 1975-1979.

### SEA DISSEMINATION SYSTEMS

In many states a unit in the State Education Agency (SEA) is assigned primary responsibility for disseminating information to the educational community as a means of facilitating improvement in education. Dissemination, in this context, is defined as "a two-way process for communicating knowledge relevant to educational needs and problems so that educational decision makers and practitioners can rationally consider alternatives to current practice and the results of research and development in improving educational programs."

Because SEAs vary in their organization and approach to school improvement, and because relationships among SEAs and LEAs are complex, no one model or approach to developing an SEA dissemination unit or system will fit all SEAs. But the functions of such a system can be described in general terms. The SEA dissemination system generally (1) collects and organizes information resources, (2) gets relevant information to clients upon request, and (3) assists the clients to varying degrees in using the information. The State Dissemination Grants Program has conceptualized such systems as being comprised of three generic components: (1) an information resource base which contains the knowledge or knowledge-based products clients need, (2) linkages to connect the resources with the people who could benefit from them, and (3) a component to coordinate the various activities needed so local educators can use the system for school improvement.

### THE STATE DISSEMINATION GRANTS PROGRAM

Through the State Dissemination Grants Program, NIE makes two types of awards to SEAs: (1) special purpose grants and (2) capacity building grants. Special purpose grants are for one year only and average $37,000 each. They support

relatively low-cost, short-term SEA improvement efforts related to building a dissemination system. These grants are used to support such SEA activities as initial planning, training of personnel, or the development of specific information resources or linkages.

Capacity building grant awards are of one-year duration and potentially renewable for three-to-five years. Capacity building grants average about $100,000 per year and support an SEA's activities to design, implement, and institutionalize the capacity "for the dissemination of the results of educational research and of new and improved practices and products in education." This portion of the SDGP is referred to as the State Capacity Building Program (SCBP).

## THE STUDY

Since October 1976, under the sponsorship of the Research and Educational Practice unit of NIE's Program on Dissemination and Improvement of Practice, NTS Research Corporation has conducted a study of the State Capacity Building Program. The basic objectives of the NTS study are:

- To describe the state capacity building projects and the SEA dissemination systems within which those projects are located.
- To describe the factors which affect the development and institutionalization of SEA dissemination systems.
- To review NIE's management of the SCBP and its operational procedures, such as proposal review, project funding policies, and project monitoring, and to examine how these relate to operations at the project level.
- To derive policy recommendations which may help improve the SCBP and future dissemination programs.

The purpose of this study was not to evaluate the success of specific capacity building projects, but rather to identify factors which facilitate or impede SEA efforts to build and institutionalize state dissemination systems. Our analyses are intended to develop an understanding of how Federal and state policy might promote the goals and objectives of this program and of future capacity building efforts.*

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* A map indicating the states, by cohort, which became a part of the Capacity Building Program and the data sources and data collection procedures for this study are described in an Addendum.

It is important to know how, and to what extent, the increased dissemination capacity translates into improvements in education. Although this study examined primary program effects -- development of dissemination capacity -- rather than secondary or "downstream" effects of the use of that capacity, anecdotal information obtained during the study suggests that school improvement efforts are being enhanced by increased dissemination capability. Questions regarding the effects of generalized dissemination approaches for improving educational practices can, and should be, addressed more systematically now that the program is established. Such an inquiry will provide additional understanding of the soundness of generalized dissemination approaches for improving educational practice.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Findings are summarized under three major research questions:

- Is dissemination capacity being built?
- What are the factors affecting the building of capacity? What helps and hinders achievement of program objectives?
- What program management and program design factors affect the building of capacity?

### Is Capacity Being Built?

1. The primary effect sought from the program--increased capacity of SEA's for dissemination--is being achieved.

    - States have substantially increased the breadth and variety of knowledge resource bases that can be accessed through the SEA dissemination unit.
    - States have modified existing structural arrangements to develop the capacity for the delivery of information to clients through "linkers" who function as information brokers.
    - Coordination of the resources for dissemination in SEAs has been improved; however, most of this improvement has occurred between the projects and other generic programs such as NDN and Title IV; less coordination has been achieved between the project and content specific programs, such as vocational education and handicapped education.

- Most states in the SCBP evidence movement toward institutionalizing their dissemination capacity, although it is still too soon in that process to determine if the dissemination system will indeed become an accepted part of SEA program services offerings.

2. The process of increasing capacity follows several different patterns depending on state history and context, and reflects the flexibility allowed by the program guidelines.

   - Resource base development has expanded primarily in the areas of promising practices and other state and local information files. It appears that in most states reliance is placed upon validated programs in the school improvement process; less emphasis is placed upon information gained from non-validated, promising practices as a basis for school improvement.

   - Three linkage patterns--which we have characterized as SEA controlled (tightly coupled), SEA coordinated (loosely coupled), and external (uncoupled)--appear to reflect state philosophy and consequent structures for school improvement.

   - Building SEA dissemination system capacity seems to have an identifiable sequence of development, but individual state factors, and changes in those factors may override this "developmental" pattern.

Factors Affecting Program Success

Success of SEA efforts to implement and institutionalize dissemination systems appear to be influenced by the following:

1. State Factors

   - Continuity of energetic and entrepreneurial leadership; but once that leadership is gone the process may become endangered.

   - Previous experience with dissemination activities is a helpful but not sufficient factor in institutionalization.

   - Placement in an administrative unit appears to assist in the development of coordination and comprehensiveness of the system. Placement in a service unit appears to assist in the delivery of services to clients and the institutionalization of the system in the SEA.

- Initial strategies of targeting clients for service and developing products for use by particular clientele enhance the development of coordination and comprehensiveness of the system. But the project needs to move on to serve the general clientele if institutionalization is to be enhanced.

- The active support of SEA administrators (Chief State School Officer and their associates) is crucial to building capacity and implementing and institutionalizing the dissemination system.

- Stringent state government budgets and inevitable changes in agency leadership affect the dissemination projects in unanticipated, generally negative ways which are largely beyond the control of project staff.

2. Program Design and Management Factors

- Collaborative planning and flexibility of Program guidelines permitted states to tailor their dissemination projects to fit their individual contexts. While these approaches have enhanced the in-state capacity for independent solutions to dissemination system development, they may also foster areas of non-clarity of purpose between NIE and the states.

- Opportunities to communicate with personnel from other states and agencies facilitate project development. Although the Program provided mechanisms for such communication and for technical assistance, these provisions appear to be too limited. In other words, the plan was appropriate; its implementation was not adequate to meet the needs of the states.

- Program objectives regarding the role of the dissemination system in relation to a state's other school improvement efforts are not adequately specified in program guidelines and project proposals. The result is that the potential for facilitating the use of new knowledge and educational practices for school improvement and equal educational opportunity is only partially seen and realized in many states participating in the Program.

- Program and project goals for increasing equity and for operationalizing those goals are not well developed. There is little evidence of program resources being directed explicitly and in concerted ways for increasing equity in education.

- NIE staff resources assigned to this Program have been too limited to provide the necessary monitoring and technical assistance needed and often requested by the state projects.

3. Other Structural Factors

- The continued fragmentation of the dissemination components of Federal programs impedes the building of generalized and comprehensive dissemination systems within the states. Despite the fragmentation, however, many states have made progress in coordinating dissemination efforts at the state level.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are presented within the context of change and uncertainties at the Federal and state levels. These uncertainties are reflected in questions about expanded Federal leadership of the growth and application of dissemination systems for assisting in attaining educational improvement and education equity. At the state level there are questions of increasing pressures on budgets for educational activities and of the willingness of states to commit themselves to continue and refine the use of dissemination systems for educational improvement and educational equity. Four major recommendations are presented:

1. Collaboratively Strengthen Program Conceptualization and Design

   The findings of this study have broad implications for future programs, but in the near-term, NIE and the states should work together to strengthen the programs in the following ways:

   - Clearer conceptualization and guidelines for ways states can use dissemination resources to facilitate significant improvements in educational practice and equity -- e.g., in connection with other SEA programs or through other external linkages with practitioners.

   - Clarify the role of state knowledge resource bases and set priorities or guidelines for types of resources that should be further developed -- e.g., those that are most used, most useful, most difficult to obtain through other means, or most relevant to equity issues in education.

   - Provision is needed for linker training, particularly to enhance skills of individuals who are already located in positions to facilitate school improvement.

- Guidelines should acknowledge the development of organizational capacities and provide assistance for critical functions at each stage. A "step-wise" or "building block" approach is recommended that is keyed to three stages -- planning, implementation and institutionalization.

2. Strengthen Program Management and Leadership

   - NIE staff resources for this program should be strengthened in order to provide more guidance on critical project issues--e.g., utilization of dissemination to enhance equality of educational opportunity, and trade-offs among alternative ways the states are authorized to use the program resources.

   - Ongoing and viable communication mechanisms among the states involved in building dissemination capacity should be created and maintained. These mechanisms could include the regional exchanges who could function as the vehicle through which communication among states within regions is maintained.

3. Improve Federal Level Coordination Mechanisms

   - Mechanisms for improving coordination of (or support for the cooperation of) Federally-funded programs should be created at the Federal level.

4. Examine Further the Secondary or "Downstream" Effects of the Program in Terms of Its Effects on Education

   - This study shows that capacity is being built, and identifies a number of factors that are enhancing and limiting the capacity building effort. The program should be examined further to determine how the capacity is used and what aspects of dissemination capacity are most critical in achieving improvements in equity and practice in education.

ADDENDUM

## Data Sources and Data Collection

Sources of data for the evaluation included: (1) two waves of data collection (1978, 1979) from Cohorts I, II, and III capacity building projects; (2) additional data collection from Cohort IV and V projects and from non-program states; (3) case studies of five projects; (4) interviews with NIE personnel involved in the design and implementation of the SCBP; and (5) information obtained from a review of existing documentation.

### Cohort I-III States

Data were collected from Cohort I, II, and III states in Fall 1978 and Fall 1979. In Fall 1978, Questionnaires were sent to SCBP project directors and interviews were conducted on-site with three respondent groups in each state: (1) SCBP project directors; (2) SEA administrators; and (3) resource base personnel.

In Fall 1979, the questionnaire was readministered to the SCBP project directors in Cohorts I-III.

### Cohorts IV, V, and Non-SCBP States

In Fall 1979, adapted versions of the questionnaires were used to collect data from states which had been recently funded and from non-SCBP states. Non-SCBP states were sent the data collection instruments in order to provide a point of comparison with the SCBP states. Respondents for the non-SCBP states were the representatives to the NIE-sponsored State Dissemination Leadership Project.

### Site Visits

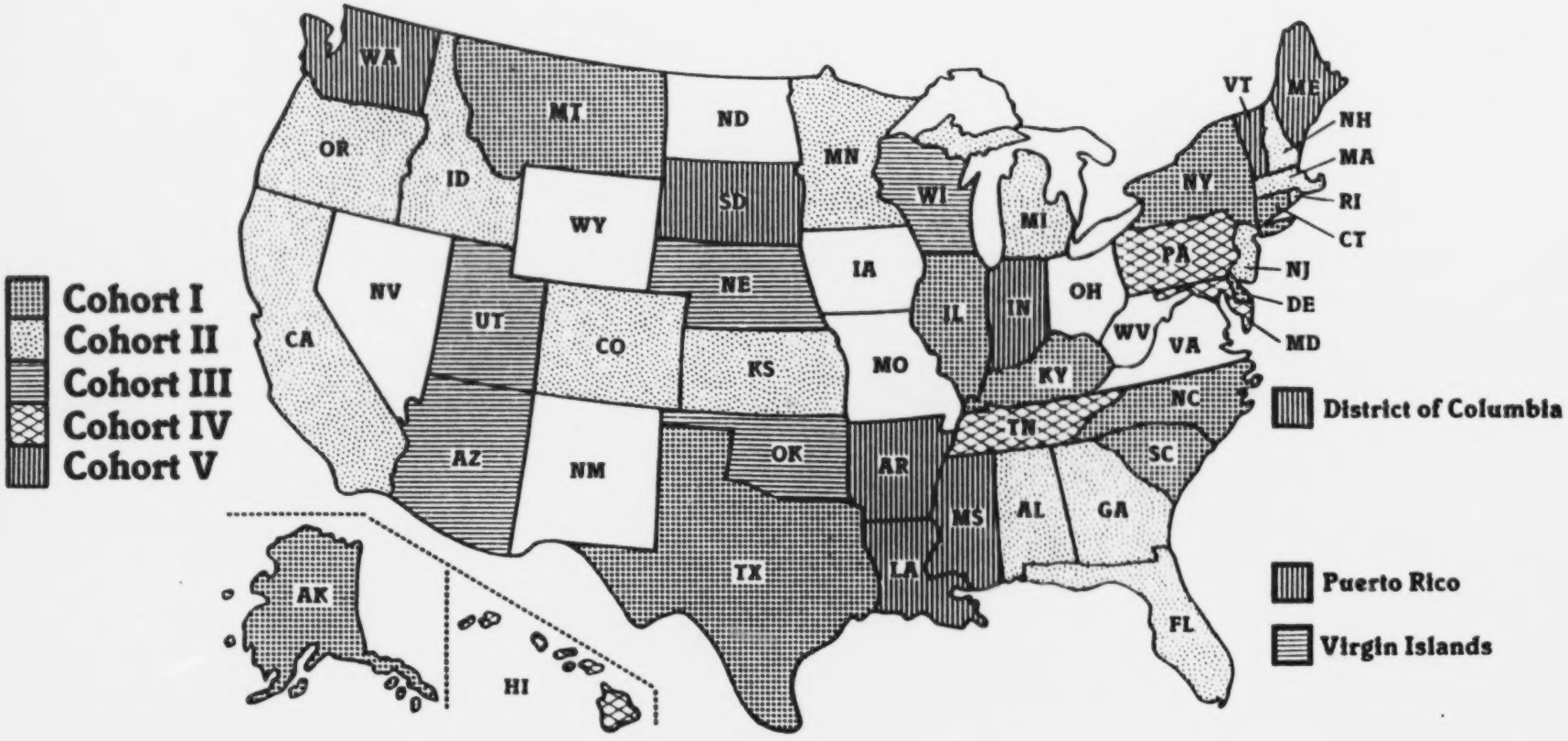
Site visits were conducted in February, 1980 to Illinois and Texas (Cohort I states) and to Kansas, Michigan, and Rhode Island (Cohort II states). In these states, two senior researchers from NTS held interviews with SEA administrators, SCBP project personnel, and representatives of other SEA agencies which are or could be a part of, or could benefit through, the SEA dissemination system.

### NIE Program Officers and Project Monitors

Interviews were conducted with NIE program officers (i.e., those involved with overall management of the Program) and project monitors (i.e., those whose SCBP responsibilities involve monitoring one or more SCBP projects) regarding the orientation, influence, and expectations of the Program and their perceptions of the Federal role in the operation of the capacity building projects. Respondents included both current and former NIE staff.

Document Review

In addition to obtaining information from the states and NIE, the NTS study team reviewed a variety of documents. For each capacity building project included in the study, the NTS team conducted a file review of all available first-year and continuation proposals and quarterly reports. The NTS study team also reviewed NIE program announcements and available grant negotiation documentation. Finally, the NTS study team collected and utilized statistical data regarding SEA and state contextual characteristics from appropriate sources (e.g., National Center for Educational Statistics).




States Receiving Capacity Building Grants Through NIE's State Dissemination Grants Programs by 1980

## REFERENCES

The NTS Research Corporation reports for this study all have the general title Building Capacity for the Improvement of Educational Practice. The complete set of volumes is as follows:


Volume I — Final Report: Building Capacity for the Improvement of Education, An Evaluation of NIE's State Dissemination Grants Program (April 1981)

Volume II — 1979 State Abstracts: State Dissemination Efforts (October 1980)

Volume III — A Study of Linker Agent Activities and Roles (April 1981)

Volume IV — A Study of the Development of Scales Measuring Dissemination Capacity (April 1981)

Volume V — Executive Summary (April 1981)


For further information contact:


NTS RESEARCH CORPORATION

2634 Chapel Hill Boulevard
Durham, North Carolina 27707
(919) 493-3451

Eugene C. Royster
Principal Investigator

Doren L. Madey
Project Director

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

Program on Dissemination and Improvement of Practices
Research and Educational Practice Unit
(202) 254-6050

Michael B. Kane
NIE Assistant Director

John C. Egermeier
Project Officer